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Ioannou, Maria; Panagiotou, Elisavet

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Opening the black box of contact: Unravelling the ways through which positive contact is imagined in a post-conflict context

Maria Ioannou[1] | Elisavet Panagiotou[2]

[1]University College Groningen, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

[2]Department of Psychology, University of Cyprus, Nicosia, Cyprus

Correspondence
Maria Ioannou, University College Groningen, University of Groningen, Hoendiepskade 23/24, Groningen 9718 BG, The Netherlands.
Email: m.ioannou@rug.nl

Abstract

While there is growing support for the prejudice-reduction effects of imagined contact, knowledge of the content of imagery in imagined contact studies remains scarce. This qualitative study aims to address this gap by unravelling the ways of imagining an intergroup encounter that is indeed positive. Our data consist of the imagined contact stories of 43 participants in two imagined contact studies conducted in Cyprus, a post-conflict context characterised by low levels of contact because of long-standing division across ethnic lines. Our analysis yielded four themes corresponding to four ways of construing positive contact: imagining a good Other, a similar Other, an inferior Other, as well as imagining successfully overcoming obstacles emerging before or during contact. While participants came up with ways to imagine positive contact that are consistent with intergroup contact literature (e.g., intergroup similarities, decategorisation), a closer look at the findings reveals that in composing a positive intergroup experience, participants made use of dysfunctional stereotypes and conflict-perpetuating narratives whose objective is to protect their superior status and to ensure their safety during contact. The findings serve as a word of caution for imagined contact as a prejudice-reduction intervention and

they also attest to the importance of deeply knowing the psychological composition of the groups which (imagined) contact interventions typically aim to tackle.

KEYWORDS
conflict, Cyprus, imagined contact, prejudice, qualitative analysis

1 | INTRODUCTION

The power of imagination entered the realm of prejudice-reduction interventions through the concept of imagined contact about a decade ago. The imagined contact hypothesis (Crisp & Turner, 2009), proposed that imagining an interaction with an outgroup member can reduce prejudice. This hypothesis received abundant support, consolidated in Miles and Crisp's (2014) meta-analysis of imagined contact studies, which demonstrated that imagined contact has reliable small-to-medium effects on a number of prejudice measures.

A review of the literature indicates an increasing research interest in exploring when and how imagined contact works (best) to reduce prejudice (see Crisp & Turner, 2012 for a review). An exploration of the content of the contact incident itself is absent, however. Research in imagined contact, much like research in intergroup contact more broadly, has so far treated the incidence of contact as a black box in which people enter and then exit as different people (Harwood, 2010).

Exceptions to the absence of inquiry into what happens during imagined contact are studies using self-reports to investigate theoretically relevant to them constructs such as vividness of imagery (Husnu & Crisp, 2010) or the feelings experienced during imagery (Husnu & Paolini, 2018). The findings of these studies contribute to knowledge about how participants experience contact; yet the content of individuals' imagery remains unknown. Our study aims at filling this gap by shedding light on what people imagine when they are instructed to imagine positive contact. More specifically, we are interested in the ways via which participants construe positive interaction in an imagined contact experiment. To unravel these, we delved into the content of peoples' imageries adopting a qualitative approach, which is best suited for this kind of inquiry.

Our inquiry is situated in Cyprus, a post-conflict context described by low levels of direct intergroup contact (Ioannou, Filippou, & Lordos, 2015). Absence of contact may result in a number of psychological barriers, such as increase of the psychological distance between the Self/ingroup and the Other manifested in the development of stereotypical images of the Other, strong views about the nature of the conflict and a strong sense of one's narrative being the right one (Coleman, 2003).

We argue that the psychological barriers stemming from a lack of meaningful intergroup contact render the imagined contact task challenging for individuals socialised in contexts such as Cyprus. This is because individuals are essentially required to carry out a task that is likely to be counterintuitive or that belongs to the sphere of the *unimaginable* (as in something difficult to imagine). For these reasons, we embarked on an exploration, in the Cypriot context, of the ways devised by the participants of imagined contact studies to successfully complete the task of mentally simulating a positive interaction between themselves and an outgroup stranger. To do that we qualitatively analysed the stories of participants using thematic analysis.

1.1 | The context of the study

Cyprus gained its independence from the British Empire and was declared a republic in 1960. A series of interethnic clashes between Greek Cypriots (majority ethnic group) and Turkish Cypriots (ethnic minority) culminated in a

Greek-led coup d'etat that ousted the Greek-Cypriot president (supposedly for being unable to serve Greek-Cypriot interests). A military intervention by Turkey then followed ostensibly to secure a safe space for Turkish Cypriots to live in peace and to thrive. Since then, the two communities have lived segregated: Turkish Cypriots in the north, Greek Cypriots in the south, and both divided by a UN-monitored ceasefire zone.

The prohibition of movement across the divide prevented any form of contact between the two communities up until 2003 when a partial lift of mobility restrictions though the opening of the checkpoints gave rise to opportunities for contact. Despite this, paucity of contact has been consistently registered especially amongst certain demographic groups such as the Greek-Cypriot youth (Ioannou et al., 2015). Young Greek Cypriots form the population this study focuses on.

2 | METHODS

The study utilised existing data from two experimental studies (conducted in 2011 and 2016) assessing the short- and long-term effects of imagined contact on prejudice-reduction.[1] The studies deployed a pre–post-delayed post-test design with a (no-contact) control group. Participants in both the experimental (imagined contact) and control condition[2] responded to three questionnaires, the first came a week before the (imagined contact) intervention, the second, immediately after the intervention, and the third, a week later. The questionnaires contained a number of different intergroup relations measures (e.g., attitudes, intergroup anxiety, behavioural intentions), whereas the first questionnaire also registered participants' levels of intergroup contact. The imagined contact scenario used in both studies reads as follows:

> Imagine that you are sitting at a café in Ledras street[3] on a Thursday afternoon. There you meet a stranger [of the same gender as you][4] who turns out to be Turkish Cypriot. Your interaction is pleasant, and you end up finding out various interesting things about him/her.

The participants were given a minute to imagine the scenario and were then asked to write down what they had imagined, in as much detail as they wished. For the purpose of the current study, we used the written text produced by the imagined contact participants in the two studies.[5]

3 | PARTICIPANTS

The participants of the two studies were all Greek-Cypriot undergraduate students recruited at the University of Cyprus[6] for what was presented to them as a study in human relations. In the study conducted in 2011 (Study 1), all 24 participants were female as they were recruited from female-dominated disciplines (Psychology and Educational Sciences). Participants had scarce prior contact with Turkish Cypriots (M = 1.57; SD = .84), rated on a scale ranging from *1*, no contact at all to *5*, a lot of contact. In the 2015 study (Study 2) there were 19 participants, 6 male and 13 female who also reported low levels of contact (M = 1.95; SD = 0.95).

4 | ANALYSIS PROCEDURES

Since the purpose of this study was to explore the ways of imagining a positive interaction, we decided to focus our analysis on the stories of participants who were successful in doing so. Two independent raters rated all participants' stories on whether the interaction they described had a positive or negative character using the scale: *−2*, negative; *−1*, towards negative; *1*, towards positive; *2*, positive. In Study 1, 18 stories were evaluated as 'positive' and six as

'towards positive' and none as '(towards) negative'. Of the stories in Study 2, nine were evaluated as 'positive', eight as 'towards positive', one as 'towards negative' and one as 'negative'. Consequently, the stories rated as (towards) positive—that is, all 24 stories of Study 1 and 17 out of the 19 stories of Study 2—were included in the qualitative analysis. The final data corpus consisted of 41 stories, of which 36 belonged to female participants.

In order to identify patterns that existed across participants and studies, we analysed the data qualitatively, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis enabled us to dive into each participant's imagery content and to contextualise their stories. The analysis was guided from the outset by the research question: 'What are the ways via which participants imagine a positive intergroup encounter?'

We first coded the data into smaller chunks of data (codes), capturing and organising in groups the basic features of the data. Given that this was an exploratory study, we used open coding and followed an inductive approach whereby codes remained closely related to the data. Following the cyclical process of qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the codes were organised into overarching sub-themes and themes which highlighted the ideas underlying and interconnecting sets of codes.

4.1 | The researchers' role

Researchers and participants share social knowledge that acts as knowledge taken-for-granted and usually remains implicit (Markova, 2007). In this study, the Greek-Cypriot identity of the two authors contributed to a nuanced understanding of the social context (e.g., the knowledge of prevailing narratives that exist in local society) which facilitated an analysis of the stories of the participants against the backdrop of the Greek-Cypriot context. However, being immersed in the Greek-Cypriot community may have also functioned as an obstacle to the identification of patterns across the data, due to the authors' habituation with the socio-cultural and political context. To ensure the credibility of the final analysis, we retained a reflective stance throughout the analysis process. Specifically, we: (a) independently coded the data before establishing a consensus about the final coding scheme; (b) coded every utterance of the participants' texts to avoid the possibility of missing any important information in the data; (c) discussed, reviewed and reflected on the analysis and interpretation until reaching a consensus; and (d) consulted with a non-Cypriot researcher who was familiar with intergroup contact research as well as the Cypriot context about the interpretation of the data.

5 | ANALYSIS

During the analysis of the data, it turned out that the codes and subsequently the themes emerging from the two studies were compatible, thus enabling us to merge the data of the two studies into the same analysis. In the analysis section, we clarify from which study each excerpt is taken (Study 1 = S1; Study 2 = S2) for transparency purposes. Four themes emerged from the analysis: (a) the good Other; (b) the similar Other; (c) the inferior Other; and (d) overcoming obstacles during contact. The first three focus on the description of the Other or their relation to the Self while the fourth focuses on the contact incident, and specifically, on ways deployed to overcome obstacles emerging. In what follows, we provide a detailed analysis of each theme along with characteristic excerpts. Table 1 provides an overview of the themes, sub-themes and codes.

The first theme, *the good Other*, presents the Other as someone with external and/or internal traits commonly respected and desired in a society. It consists of excerpts presenting the Other as an individual with a pleasant demeanour, positive personality traits (e.g., 'I was driven by her politeness', *Participant 1-S1*), good appearance (e.g., 'a beautiful girl, nicely dressed', *Participant 8-S1*) and/or as someone who excels in a given field (e.g., 'her dream is to dance as a prima ballerina in Russia', *Participant 9-S1*).

TABLE 1 Themes, sub-themes, codes and frequencies of thematic analysis

Theme	Sub-theme	Code	Code definition	Code frequency
The good Other		Positive personality traits	Attributing to Other positive personality characteristics (e.g., polite, pleasant)	11
		'Good' appearance	Describing Other based on positive physical traits (e.g., beautiful; well-dressed)	4
		Other as exceptional	Other presented as exceptionally capable	7
The similar Other	Similar to Self	Things in common	Self and Other as similar in interests, views, etc.	22
	Similar to ingroup	Other looks like us	Other as physically similar to ingroup	4
		Other speaks Greek	Other as able to speak ingroup's language	6
		Similar or acceptable opinions on conflict	Other expresses views that are in agreement with ingroup's narrative or generally accepted by ingroup	10
	Common ingroup	Identifying common ingroup	Identifying and highlighting a group in which both Self and Other belong (e.g., gender or age)	3
The inferior Other		Oppressing north	Other having (had) negative experiences because of living in the north	3
		Other does not belong	Other as a foreigner (e.g., a Turk)	5
		Ashamed Other	Other as ashamed of their identity	2
		Other seeking help	Other as needing help from Self (e.g., asking for approval)	7
Overcoming obstacles during contact	Supportive ingroup	Background role	Contact happens in the company of ingroup members who are not, however, actively engaged	5
		Active role	Ingroup member(s) actively involved in the interaction (e.g., as facilitators/initiators)	8
		Issue avoidance	Active avoidance of sensitive conversation topics (e.g., political issues)	4
		Discomfort to comfort (time)	Initial experience of discomfort gives way to more comfort	9

In the excerpt below, the participant describes how the interaction between her and the Turkish-Cypriot character of the story evolved, after discovering the Turkish-Cypriot identity of the character. The participant quickly overlooks the ethnic identity of the Other ('I did not mind at all that she was Turkish Cypriot') and focuses on less controversial features of her interlocutor, such as her studies and hobbies (a psychology student, a poet):

> We exchanged names and I realised where she was from. I nevertheless asked her directly to make sure. I can say with confidence that I did not mind at all that she was Turkish Cypriot. She was studying psychology, as I am, and she also liked writing poetry. She happened to have in front of her a notebook where she was writing something. I asked if I could have a look. Her poems were amazing.

> They touched my soul. She was an unbelievably polite girl. We had an interesting conversation about the things we like and the paths we wish to follow. (*Participant 20-S1*)

The Other here is presented as a person who is talented in poetry, 'they [her poems] touched my soul', and 'unbelievably' polite. Similar patterns of an extremely 'good' interlocutor exist across the data ('She told me she was going to one of the best universities in the UK, that she had obtained a scholarship and that she believed a lot of career opportunities would arise for her in the UK', *Participant*, *3-S1*). Arguably, the creation of exceptional, attractive, pleasant characters, leaves no room for disliking the Other or for a negative experience while interacting with them.

Imagining an exceptional—as opposed to a merely good other—was particularly interesting to observe. By imagining an exceptional other, participants attributed to their interlocutor qualities that are not typically associated with negatively valued outgroups. Yetkili, Abrams, Travaglino, and Giner-Sorolla (2018) found that imagining an atypical outgroup member improved outgroup attitudes partly by reducing intergroup anxiety. These findings suggest that there is a possible psychological explanation behind the choice of our participants to construe their interlocutor in an extremely favourable light and that is a preference to be interacting with more atypical than typical outgroup members.

Interestingly, the participants (including the author of the story above) sometimes express indifference to, or not being bothered by, the character's ethnic identity (e.g., 'Even after knowing where he is from [...]' *Participant 18-S2*). Although not the rule, participants often chose to focus on individual traits of their interlocutor while passing over their ethnic identity. This is an act described as decategorisation (or personalisation) in intergroup literature (e.g., Miller, 2002) and presented as an avenue to positive (and effective) contact since it reduces group distinctiveness and makes space for the individual to be 'judged' on the merit of their personal traits and not pre-judged because of their group membership.

The Turkish-Cypriot character described by Participant 20-S1 is further imagined as a person who is in the same field of studies as the participant ('she was studying psychology, as I was') while the use of the pronoun 'we' ('conversation for the things we like and the paths we wish to follow') creates a sense of closeness and similarity between the Self and the Other. The following section discusses in detail this precise tendency of participants to imagine an outgroup member that was similar to themselves.

The second them, *the similar Other*, is divided into two sub-themes revealing similarities to the imagined Other, either at an: (a) interpersonal; or (b) intergroup level. At the interpersonal level, the Other is construed as an individual with common interests and life paths (e.g., 'We discovered that we have the same worries, the same interests and problems', *Participant 6-S1*) or having the same gender, age, occupation as the Self (e.g., 'I felt very comfortable when I found out that the girl was the same age as me and a student', *Participant 19-S1*). Participants discovering that they have commonalities with their interacting partner was a strongly recurrent code across the data.

This pattern aligns with the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Byrne, 1969) according to which individuals who we perceive as more similar to us are more attractive/likeable to us.

Below is an example of a story where sharing an identity with the imagined outgroup member helped the bonding of the participant with the Other:

> What I imagined was that we were in a cafeteria and met this girl. I was feeling comfortable. During the meeting we had a pleasant chat since there were only men in the rest of the group. We talked about things like studies, general knowledge and fashion. (*Participant 16-S1*)

Instead of preserving the salience of the category dichotomising ingroup and outgroup (ethnicity), the participant naturally applies cross-categorization principles (Deschamps & Doise, 1978) and chooses a category that crosses the first one, in this case gender, which allows them to become members of a different ingroup: women. This common ingroup facilitates or justifies the pleasant encounter ('we had a pleasant chat since the rest of the group were men').

Other ways of bringing the Other closer to oneself are by: (a) imagining a character who speaks the ingroup's native language, Greek, (e.g., 'I thought she didn't speak Greek so I said "hello" in English, but she replied to me in Greek and said she speaks Greek fluently', *Participant 13-S1*); (b) describing the Other as someone that does not stand out as a non-(Greek) Cypriot (e.g., 'She is a girl like us, she does not differ at all, you cannot tell she is not Cypriot, because she is', *Participant 1-S2*); or (c) imagining a character whose views on the Cyprus Conflict are commonly acceptable (mainly) by the Greek-Cypriot community (e.g., 'Nevertheless, we both concluded that Cyprus would be better-off if united into a single state', *Dataset 1*, *Participant 18*).

Overall, this theme focuses on the representation of the Other as someone who is similar to the Self either at a personal level (same interests, concerns) or at an intergroup level (someone who looks like the ingroup, speaks the ingroup's language and holds compatible opinions regarding the political dispute), thus using the Self as a reference point at which the Other complies. A third way devised by participants to imagine a positive interaction, even though not as recurrent as imagining similarities, was to construe a situation where features that distinguish the Self from the Other were highlighted. We elaborate on this below.

The third theme, *the inferior Other*, refers to instances where participants distinguished the Self from the Other, typically by putting the Self in a more favourable position. In the following extract, there is a strong representation of Turkish-Cypriot society as oppressive:

> She told me that she has many siblings from different mothers. I figured that generally speaking she has the same aspirations as us but I felt she was more trapped and more oppressed. (*Participant 13-S1*)

By using the words 'but' and 'more' (trapped and oppressed) the participant highlights differences between the two communities after mentioning several vague similarities. Even though not explicitly stated, the comparison favours Greek-Cypriot society which is not (as) oppressive and does not entrap people (women in this case).

The participant does not specify why the girl came across as oppressed and trapped but it is a possible assumption that it has to do with her 'having many siblings from different mothers'. The Other is indirectly construed as a descendant of a family that observes Islamic traditions (men being allowed to marry more than one wife), a portrayal that in fact clashes with the very secular character of the Turkish-Cypriot community (Yeşilada, 2009). This representation of Turkish Cypriots could be a product of pure ignorance with regards to Turkish Cypriots or a product of mixing up Turkish Cypriots and mainland Turks who, like Turkish Cypriots, reside in the north of the country and are considered to be substantially more religious. Such was the case in this extract: 'I went over to ask her name and when she told me it, I figured she had something to do with Turkey. Indeed, she was Turkish Cypriot' (*Participant 1-S1*).

In other instances, the representation of the other as inferior was achieved by situating oneself in a position of power, the power that comes with being able to offer help to the Other (e.g., 'She was trying to find something desperately. I asked her if she needed help and she responded positively', *Participant 6-S2*); the power to make someone feel at ease (e.g., 'I did not want to make the Turkish-Cypriot man feel bad so I talked to him', *Participant 7-S2*); and the power to accept or approve the Other (e.g., 'I asked her where she was from and she told me she was from Kyrenia (a city in the north of the island) and that she was Turkish Cypriot, she looked down and I sensed that she felt I was going to dismiss her. I continued the conversation', *Participant 2-S1*).

In all these instances, the Other is put in a less powerful and more vulnerable position in relation to the Greek-Cypriot participants. This dynamic may be facilitated by the fact that the encounter takes place on the participants' own ground (the south), a safe zone which equips participants with the resources to be in control. It is also very much aligned, however, with the status of the majority as well as the economic superiority of the Greek-Cypriot community's status, one which these participants seem to be well aware of and apparently, willing to preserve. By maintaining this particular power differential, these participants keep the Other in an inferior position because of their group membership. Finally, by presenting the Other as inferior and powerless the Other automatically becomes

non-threatening. This is important given how perceiving the outgroup as threatening is typically associated with (negative) intergroup relations and contact avoidance (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). A non-threatening Other facilitates and justifies a positive intergroup interaction.

The fourth and final theme, *Overcoming obstacles during contact*, focuses on the ways participants dealt with discomfort during the encounter. These included using time as a natural means to comfort as well as the discovery of similarities between them and their interlocutor (e.g., 'In the beginning I felt a bit awkward [...] eventually our views did not differ that much', *Participant 14-S1*), avoidance of discussion of sensitive topics such as the history of intergroup conflict (e.g., 'Even though I have no issues with Turks/Turkish Cypriots, this discussion scares me a bit since I feel I'm not well-informed', *Participant 8-S2*), and/or placing other ingroup members (mostly friends) in either a passive role (situated in the background of the stories) or in an active one (being engaged in the encounter).

In the excerpt below the participant describes her difficulties in commencing the conversation and explains how the intervention of a (mutual) friend facilitated the course of the conversation, which resulted in a feeling of comfort:

> My meeting with this girl happened via a mutual contact who happened to be studying with the girl abroad. At first, I didn't know how to talk to her and what kind of topics to discuss with a Turkish-Cypriot girl. My friend picked that up and initiated a discussion about studies [...]. That's when I started feeling more comfortable as I realised that we had nearly no differences, but only a lot of similarities, similar dreams and expectations. (*Participant 3-S1*)

Central to this excerpt is the intervention of an ingroup member, when the participant struggled with her inefficacy to effect contact. This ingroup member is not only the facilitator but also the initiator of the discussion, for being the one who has contacts with the outgroup. Extended contact, having a friend who has an outgroup friend (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997), becomes a means of turning an otherwise unlikely encounter into a feasible one by having an ingroup member mediating the contact that the self has with the outgroup. Ingroup presence, either active (e.g., 'My friend who is doing Turkish studies approached her and we found out she spoke Greek', *Participant 12-S1*), or more passive (e.g., 'Present in *our company* was a Turkish Cypriot girl, whom I got to meet and talk to', *Participant 12-S2*) was a recurrent code in the data. This, we argue, points to a subtle but pervasive need for the ingroup's support to, or approval of, the intergroup interaction. This need seems to be met by having ingroup members featuring in the imagined encounter and/or presenting them as individuals who already have contact with the outgroup.

The need for ingroup's support and approval is in line with study findings showing that intra-group support for contact can facilitate intergroup encounters that are otherwise perceived as threatening and anxiety-provoking (Stevenson & Sagherian-Dickey, 2016). The need for ingroup approval is not surprising given the fact that intergroup contact in contexts of conflict, like Cyprus, is a politically loaded act that comes with social ramifications for people engaging in it. Securing ingroup's support and approval therefore enables the construal of an intergroup interaction that is positive since it is acceptable to ingroup members.

A third way of overcoming obstacles during the interaction to create a positive encounter was to avoid discussing sensitive issues:

> I started off the discussion talking about feminism, as this is what I always do when I meet someone new. I avoided a discussion on race since I knew that we were both probably exposed to opposing historical narratives. Even though I have no problem with Turks/Turkish Cypriots these topics scare me because I am not well-read. (Participant 8-S2)

This participant pictures herself taking the lead in the discussion by choosing a topic she feels comfortable with. In doing so, she guards herself against topics (like 'a discussion on race') that would put her in an uncomfortable

position. This behaviour relates to what in literature is termed as issue avoidance, that is, the conversational avoidance of sensitive intergroup topics (Barlow, Louis, & Hewstone,2009). The participant avoids these topics for two reasons: (a) the conviction that she and her imagined interacting partner would be entering such a discussion from opposing departure points ('we were both probably exposed to opposing historical narratives'); and (b) her (self-admitted) ignorance about these topics ('I am not well-read'). These reasons, however, are not mutually exclusive, instead, they interlink: the participant knows that conversations of this kind either lead to conflict and thus a negative contact experience (which was the opposite of what she was instructed to do) or require intense perspective-taking and perspective-giving neither of which she feels equipped to do. Perspective-taking was overwhelmingly absent from participants' stories. This extract sheds light on possible reasons by which participants resist entering a process of perspective-taking (and giving). The most prevalent one is lack of resources (in this case, knowledge) that would allow them to engage in successful perspective-taking.

6 | DISCUSSION

This study serves as the first qualitative inquiry into imagined contact and sheds light on the multiple ways of construing a positive intergroup encounter via thematically analysing imagined contact stories. In this section, we synthesise the findings, discuss how they inform the existing knowledge base, and what their implications are for future research in the area of imagined contact. The analysis yielded four themes corresponding to the main ways participants used to imagine a positive contact experience: *The good Other*, *the similar Other*, *the inferior Other* and *Overcoming obstacles during contact*. There are two prevailing and interconnected properties largely traversing these four themes: (a) the centrality of the Self; and (b) the need for safety during contact.

6.1 | Centrality of the self

While there was constant reference to the Other in the participants' narratives, the Self (and the ingroup) were the yardstick against which the Other was measured. The Other was construed in either a positive light, as an 'ideal Other', or in a negative light, as oppressed and powerless. In the first instance, the 'ideal Other' was presented as someone who is very similar to the Self or the ingroup (e.g., the Other speaks Greek or has compatible opinions about the political dispute), or someone who complies with social standards of decency and success (e.g., someone extremely polite or accomplished academically), approved or even exhorted by the ingroup.

A qualitatively different way of portraying the Other in relation to the Self was as someone different from the Self/ the ingroup but in a way that clearly favoured the Self. In trying to imagine something positive, the participants made use of dysfunctional and inaccurate stereotypes (e.g., 'she has many siblings from many different mothers'), capitalised on ingroup-favouring power dynamics (i.e., 'she thought I would reject her [for being Turkish Cypriot]'), and misidentified the Other (i.e., 'I thought she was related to Turkey. Indeed, she was Turkish Cypriot'). By presenting the Other as inferior and themselves as better-off, participants essentially catered for the(ir) need to be positively distinct from the outgroup, a need, which in social psychological literature is regarded to be at the heart of intergroup conflict (see Social Identity Theory, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The fact that providing the need to be positively distinct from the outgroup is presented as a way to achieve a positive intergroup encounter is telling of how easily things can go wrong in intergroup relations. It is essentially a manifestation of how blind one can be to how one's beliefs, stereotypes and practices may sabotage intergroup relations due to an obliviousness to the needs, grievances, perspectives of the outgroup. The 'ideal Other' and the oppressed, powerless Other are two nearly antithetical construals of the Other. These construals, however, share the important commonality of placing the Self in the centre and of serving the function of not undermining nor constructing a threat to the Self.

6.2 | Need for safety

The fourth theme *Overcoming obstacles during contact* sheds light on the fact that the participants were apprehensive before and/or during the interaction, and how they resolved their apprehension and assumed action (i.e., positively interacted with outgroup member). Certain obstacles that were highlighted by the participants, such as not knowing how to start a conversation and what (not) to talk about with their interlocutor, have also been identified in prior intergroup literature (e.g., issue avoidance). The prevailing need cutting across all these obstacles, however, is the need of the participants to feel safe during the encounter.

Safety is ensured in a number of ways surfacing in all four themes. These ways include the following: (a) imagining an Other that is good inside and out (e.g., Other as polite and/or beautiful) and therefore, not hostile or potentially threatening to the Self; (b) imagining the Other as inferior (e.g., an oppressed Other) and, as such, incapable of causing harm but more likely to seek help; (c) avoiding potentially unsettling issues like a discussion around the political problem (e.g., by setting the tone of the interaction and the topic discussed); (d) ensuring the passive or active presence of the ingroup during the interaction (e.g., by imagining a friend being present during contact); and (e) presenting the outgroup member as similar to Self (e.g., by imagining someone who speaks Greek) so as not to have to cross uncomfortable cultural, linguistic or other boundaries.

These findings illustrate that safety is a key feature of a positive interaction which is why participants devised all sorts of ways to ensure it. This need of participants to ensure (*their own*) safety raises the question of how this very need would loom even larger if the encounter happened in a less safe-for the Self-space, as, for example, in the Turkish-Cypriot north. In this way, it draws attention to the importance of *space* in intergroup contact, a less explored dimension of contact in the intergroup contact literature.

6.3 | Implications for imagined contact research

The findings of the study provide additional insights into the existing knowledge base of imagined contact. In this final section, we explicate how our findings inform imagined contact research, acknowledge the constraints of our study, and make recommendations for future research.

Firstly, our study shows that even individuals with scarce prior contact in a segregated post-conflict context can and do imagine an intergroup encounter that is positive. Independent raters evaluating the stories produced by our imagined contact participants, rated all of them but two as (towards) positive. This finding confirms that imagined contact forms a safe space for positive intergroup encounters to 'occur' even in contexts of entrenched conflict (see also Husnu & Paolini, 2018 for reaching a similar conclusion).

A second finding of our study is that the ways in which the participants construed positive contact are, to a great extent, in agreement with prejudice-reduction techniques identified in the literature (e.g., decategorisation, highlighting similarities, minimising outgroup threat). This suggests that individuals naturally deploy these strategies when asked to imagine a positive intergroup encounter even without having these strategies pointed out to them. What we do not know from this study, however, is which of these ways of imagining positive contact are successful in advancing more positive and sustained intergroup outcomes. We suggest that future studies first identify the ways in which participants imagine positive contact, possibly through qualitative explorations, and then test them as predictors of change in relevant intergroup outcomes through large-scale quantitative studies. This will enable researchers to find out which ways (of construing positive contact) give rise to more profound and lasting positive intergroup outcomes.

Yet, knowledge of which ways of imagining contact lead to greater prejudice reduction should be utilised with caution especially when deployed to inform (enhance) the imagined contact scenario. Ioannou, Al Ramiah, and Hewstone (2017), induced interpersonal/intergroup similarity -which was one of the strategies widely used by participants in our study- in their imagined contact scenario by asking participants to imagine that the encounter with

the outgroup member led them to discover similarities between themselves and the outgroup (member). This, however, resulted in a more negative intergroup experience as it elicited a threat to identity distinctiveness and more negative outgroup attitudes by comparison to the condition asking participants to imagine that they were both similar and different to the outgroup (member). This serves as a reminder of the difference between strategies participants naturally use to imagine a positive intergroup interaction and top–down strategies instructed by researchers or practitioners. Therefore, even if we do know which ways of imagining contact work best to reduce prejudice these very strategies could backfire if they are dictated to participants.

The findings of the current study are bound within the specific post-conflict context of Cyprus. Hence, we are unable to conclude that the ways of construing positive contact as unravelled in our study would replicate in contexts where the nature or the current stage of conflict is different or amongst groups that have different statuses in the conflict. Studies in different contexts or comparative studies would thus help elucidate how context-specific ways of construing positive contact are.

Another factor that could be affecting the ways individuals imagine positive contact is gender. Though there are no gender differences regarding the imagined contact effects on different intergroup outcomes (Miles & Crisp, 2014), the strategies individuals deploy to imagine a positive intergroup encounter could be affected by gender. The disproportional number of female compared to male participants in our study confines us from discussing such differences and future studies with a similar scope should perhaps strive to achieve gender balance and thus take gender into account.

An important finding of this study is that many of the ways our participants devised to construe positive contact were in fact prejudice-ridden. In attempting to construe a positive interaction, participants in our study put to play dysfunctional stereotypes and reinforced conflict-perpetuating narratives via a very ego-serving narrative. This comes as a great contradiction to the actual purpose of imagined contact which is to reduce prejudice. This finding begs the pressing question of what the use of imagined contact's positive intergroup outcomes is if the way to get there is ridden by prejudice-sustaining views.

Ours of course is not the only study that shows that imagined contact may not always be successful in its cause. A study by Bagci, Stathi, and Piyale (2019) carried out in a different context of entrenched conflict (Turkish-Kurdish relations) found that imagined contact with a Turk (majority group), led to perceptions of decreased social acceptance and decreased contact participation, amongst Kurds (minority group), who identified highly with the Kurdish identity or Kurds living in conflict-ridden settings. In this study, the majority group (Greek Cypriots) appear to have benefitted from imagined contact with the minority group (Turkish Cypriots) according to the quantitative evaluation of the intervention (see Ioannou, 2019), but the content of their stories, as revealed by this qualitative analysis, was in numerous cases far from prejudice-free.

Perhaps a response to this imagined contact critique is that imagined contact predominantly aims at addressing the psychological symptoms of the problem (like reducing anxiety for future intergroup encounters) but not the problem itself (e.g., challenging conflict-perpetuating narratives). Imagined contact also was never suggested as a substitute to direct contact but as a method of paving the way towards it (Crisp & Turner, 2009). In this course of events, the difficult task of challenging existing narratives is left to direct contact. If such is the case, then future research in imagined contact should prioritise this role of imagined contact over others; it should thus focus on how to maximise imagined contact's effectiveness in creating an appetite for more and more meaningful intergroup encounters.

The above also lead us to consider an alternative function of imagined contact (other than its prejudice-reduction function), namely that of a tool providing us with a window to the representations individuals hold about the outgroup and about intergroup relations. As evidenced in this study, the imagined contact stories of our participants are telling of how they represent the outgroup and its members and what the prospect of an intergroup encounter means for them or what needs it generates; what obstacles they foresee and what could perhaps help them overcome them. Such insights can be used to inform our understanding of the nature of conflict in a given context and within a certain demographic group which can be used as input for the design of (informed) interventions aiming at reducing conflict.

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ORCID

Maria Ioannou https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4937-7960

ENDNOTES

[1] The detailed results of these studies are reported elsewhere (Ioannou, 2019).

[2] Participants in the control group either received no intervention (Study 1) or were asked to imagine a positive outdoor scene (Study 2).

[3] Ledras street is a very popular and historical street in the centre of the capital, Nicosia.

[4] Participants were instructed to imagine an outgroup member with the same gender as them to keep gender a constant in the imagined contact interactions.

[5] The participants wrote their stories in Greek and the analysis was conducted on the Greek text; the excerpts presented in the analysis section were translated in English by the authors for the purpose of this article.

[6] A state university located in the capital, Nicosia. The vast majority are Greek Cypriot and Greek students. Available statistics by the student services of the University of Cyprus indicate that in Year 2012–2013 of the 5,074 undergraduate students, *one* was Turkish Cypriot (http://www.ucy.ac.cy/fmweb/documents/UndergraduateOffice/Statistics_Acad_Year_2012-2013_prepared_for_PDF.pdf). While the age of participants was not registered, all participants were undergraduate students, which means they were typically between 18 and 23 years old.

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